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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BOGOTA 000310

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SUBJECT: ONDCP DIRECTOR WALTERS AND U.S. REPRESENTATIVES'
JANUARY 19 MEETING WITH PRESIDENT URIBE

Classified By: Ambassador William R. Brownfield
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (SBU) President Uribe told ONDCP Director Walters and five U.S. Congressmen in a 19 January meeting that his Democratic Security policy enjoyed bipartisan support, noting that its economic and social goals had predated the campaign for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Uribe said the GOC had increased resources for Colombia's Prosecutor General and proposed new labor legislation to address U.S. concerns. He stressed that U.S. approval of an FTA would reduce poverty, and signal U.S. support for Colombia in the face of increased tensions with Venezuela, and underscoring USG-GOC shared democratic values. On hostages, Uribe said the GOC would rely on facilitation efforts of the Catholic Church and three European countries -- France, Spain and Switzerland. The GOC saw no room for further mediation efforts by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Defense Minister Santos urged that the USG and GOC negotiate implementation of cuts in Plan Colombia funding to minimize disruption of key programs. End Summary.

2. (U) Participants:

UNITED STATES

ONDCP Director John Walters
Ambassador William Brownfield
Representative Ander Crenshaw (R-FL)
Representative Darrell Issa (R-CA)
Representative John Mica (R-FL)
Representative Silvestre Reyes (D-TX)
Representative Mark Souder (R-IN)
SBA Administrator Steve Preston
Staffers (2) and ONDCP officers (5)

COLOMBIA

President Alvaro Uribe
Foreign Minister Fernando Araujo
Ambassador Carolina Barco
Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos
Social Protection Minister Diego Palacio
National Planning Director Carolina Renteria
Social Action Commissioner Luis Alfonso Hoyos
Reintegration Commissioner Frank Pearl
U.S. and Canada Desk Officer Patricia Cortes
Accompanying staff and officials

DEMOCRATIC SECURITY: Broad Bipartisan Goals

13. (SBU) Uribe thanked the members of the delegation for their interest in Colombia and for U.S. bipartisan support. He emphasized that his Democratic Security policy had always had a broad-based set of economic and social goals -- such as investment to overcome poverty, promote social cohesion, and build democratic institutions. Since 2002, the policy was "for all Colombians -- employers, workers, politicians, trade union leaders, and the opposition." The GOC's interest in protecting all groups, he stressed, predated pressures related to the FTA.

JUSTICE AND LABOR: Expansion and Reforms

14. (SBU) Uribe reviewed recent GOC measures to address justice and labor issues. He had approved a ten percent

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increase in the staff of the Prosecutor General, adding 2,167 prosecutors, investigators, and other personnel. On labor issues, his administration had submitted three new bills to Congress. The first would ensure social benefits for workers in cooperatives, while the second bill would task the courts to decide the legality of public sector strikes. The third bill, heeding International Labor Organization (ILO) guidance, would extend the period of employer-union dialogue before strike cases would go to an arbitration tribunal.

FTA: A Political Signal Attracting Investment

15. (SBU) Representative Mica cautioned that the change in U.S. Congressional leadership had ushered in a new era, one of less funding and a shift in emphasis to trade and business. Uribe concurred on the need to strengthen the U.S.-Colombia economic relationship. He said that even if a FTA did not increase Colombia's near-term exports to the United States, it would attract foreign investment. Many investors are waiting to come in, he said, and more investment would create jobs and reduce poverty.

16. (C) Uribe said the FTA would also provide a "clear political signal" of U.S. support in the face of Colombia's increasingly strained relations with Venezuela. "We can't stay in limbo," he said, "with difficulties with our neighbors and disapproval from the United States." President Chavez' public support of the FARC raised the prospect of material Venezuelan assistance to the group, adding greater urgency to the fight against terror and drugs. Uribe said Colombia remains committed to containing Chavez' expansion in the region, but cautioned that it needs concrete U.S. support to do so. A combination of Plan Colombia cuts and FTA failure would be a "disaster." Minister Santos agreed, describing a regional contest between competing concepts of democracy (Venezuela's statist, authoritarian model vs. Colombia's open, liberal model). U.S. approval of the FTA would also signal an endorsement of shared values.

HOSTAGES: Next Steps, and Non-Negotiables

¶17. (C) Asked about the hostages, Uribe said the three Americans had as much importance to the GOC as the Colombians. Both the President and the Defense Minister would address the topic during his January 20-24 trip to Europe. The GOC planned to proceed along three tracks: authorizing the Catholic Church to contact the FARC to arrange a meeting zone; allowing mediation by France, Spain, and Switzerland in conjunction with the Catholic Church initiative; and seeking an international medical mission to tend to the hostages in the jungle. When asked if Uribe had firm commitments from the Catholic Church or the three countries on this plan, he replied "not yet." Uribe stressed that he would not accept further mediation by Chavez, who had emerged as complicit with the FARC. Military rescue was still an option -- in part to show the FARC that the GOC was not resigned. In this U.S. intelligence could help to locate the hostages, and multilateral organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross might secure their release.

¶18. (C) Representative Souder noted that in the U.S. experience, concessions would only encourage more kidnappings. He urged Uribe not to allow France to pressure him into negotiations with the FARC on a humanitarian exchange. Uribe replied that the GOC had already resisted much pressure -- holding to its "non-negotiable" points of denying the FARC's demand for a demilitarized zone and requiring released prisoners to commit not to return to FARC ranks. Still, with Colombian public opinion anxious about the hostages' health, the GOC had to offer alternatives. Uribe added that he would bear Souder's advice in mind, balancing his remarks in Europe accordingly.

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NATIONALIZATION: Concern for Sliding Back

¶19. (SBU) Walters raised the issue of pending transfers of assets and costs from the USG to Colombia, emphasizing that the U.S. wanted to work with Colombia to ensure a smooth transition. He voiced concerns that existing security and counter drug programs, especially related to air mobility, risked an abrupt loss of capacity. Santos responded that the U.S. reductions cut deeper than expected, and came two years earlier than planned. He urged the USG and GOC to negotiate how to apply the cuts. Uribe said it was premature to phase out Plan Colombia until drug production went down, and until the GOC could maintain a high rate of investment to fight the war alone. Walters suggested that the GOC build its figures into a transition plan to reflect its ability to assume Plan Colombia costs.

¶10. (U) Congressional members did not clear this cable.
Brownfield